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The Spring That Never Came

Georgia Southern Athletic Seasons of 2019-20

By GS Sports Information

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Fresh off a Sun Belt Conference Tournament quarterfinal 81-62 win over Georgia State in Atlanta, the Georgia Southern men's basketball was sitting in its hotel the day after set for a 6 p.m. flight to New Orleans.

Spring Sports would soon be underway, and championships of the winter season would soon be crowned and complete. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the league put out a statement that the rest of the SBC Tournament would play in front of no fans at 11 a.m. Then one-by-one all the leagues started canceling their tourneys. The team was on a bus headed back to Statesboro by 2.

It was an abrupt ending but I'm totally supportive of the decision. I don't feel comfortable jeopardizing the safety of our players, staff and their families. I'm heartbroken for this team, especially our seniors because we were playing great, and we all felt destined to win the championship.

Former Men's Basketball Head Coach Mark Byington



Isaiah Crawley and Eito Yuminami Celebrate A Win

Georgia Southern baseball's season was halted just 16 games into the 2020 season. The Eagles were 11-5 and had just swept in-state rival and nationally ranked, No. 3 Georgia. The sweep was the first time since 2015 that Georgia Southern had taken all three games from the Bulldogs.

The Eagles opened up the 2020 season with a series sweep over Ball State, before falling to No. 19 Georgia Tech in the midweek. GS would be swept by No. 21 ECU in Greenville, North Carolina, the following weekend, beginning the 2020 campaign 3-4. The Eagles would go on to win eight of their final nine games, including the last seven of the season.

During those seven victories the Eagles posted two double digit run games, three shutouts and outscored opponents 53-6. The six shutouts this season equals the 2019 season total and was one off the previous best of seven in 2016. Head coach Rodney Hennon collected his 800th career victory with a 1-0 win over No. 3 Georgia at SRP Park and the Eagles pitching staff did not surrender a run in 35 and 2/3 innings of work.



Team Celebrates Win over Ball St.

The Eagles produced 99 runs throughout the first 16 games of the season, while batting .263 as a team. The 2020 squad smashed five home runs, including Mason McWhorter's grand slam against Valparaiso, in the Eagles 12-0 victory.

Individually Mitchell Golden returned from injury in 2020, to lead the team with a .356 batting average. He collected 16 hits, scoring nine runs, and driving six runs as well. McWhorter led the team with 23 RBIs and was on pace to shatter his total of 57 RBIs from last season. Tyler Owens shut down No. 3 Georgia on two different occasions, posting 10 innings of one-run baseball and posting a 2-0 record over the Bulldogs this season. Owens finished the season with 15 strikeouts, while a third of those came against UGA.

Jordan Jackson was lights out as the Friday night starter, posting a 1.57 ERA and a 3-1 record. Opponents struggled to hit Jackson, batting .158 and striking out 24 times. Jackson allowed four runs, on 12 hits this season and only fell to No. 21 ECU in Greenville.

"The one thing that I take away from our shortened 2020 season is the way in which our team responded from adversity early on and used it in a positive way to grow and improve. Following a tough four-game stretch that culminated by getting swept at East Carolina, I think our players took it upon themselves to play with a stronger sense of urgency and respond in a positive way. As a result, we won eight of our next nine games including a seven-game winning streak when the season ended highlighted by a three-game midweek series sweep of number 3 nationally ranked Georgia. We were playing beautiful baseball, guys were playing very

hard, playing together, and really clicking on all cylinders. Although much of the 2020 season remained, there was a real sense among our team that we could accomplish some special things together. Unfortunately, we did not get to complete the season and see exactly how the journey would play out.

Baseball Head Coach Rodney Hennon



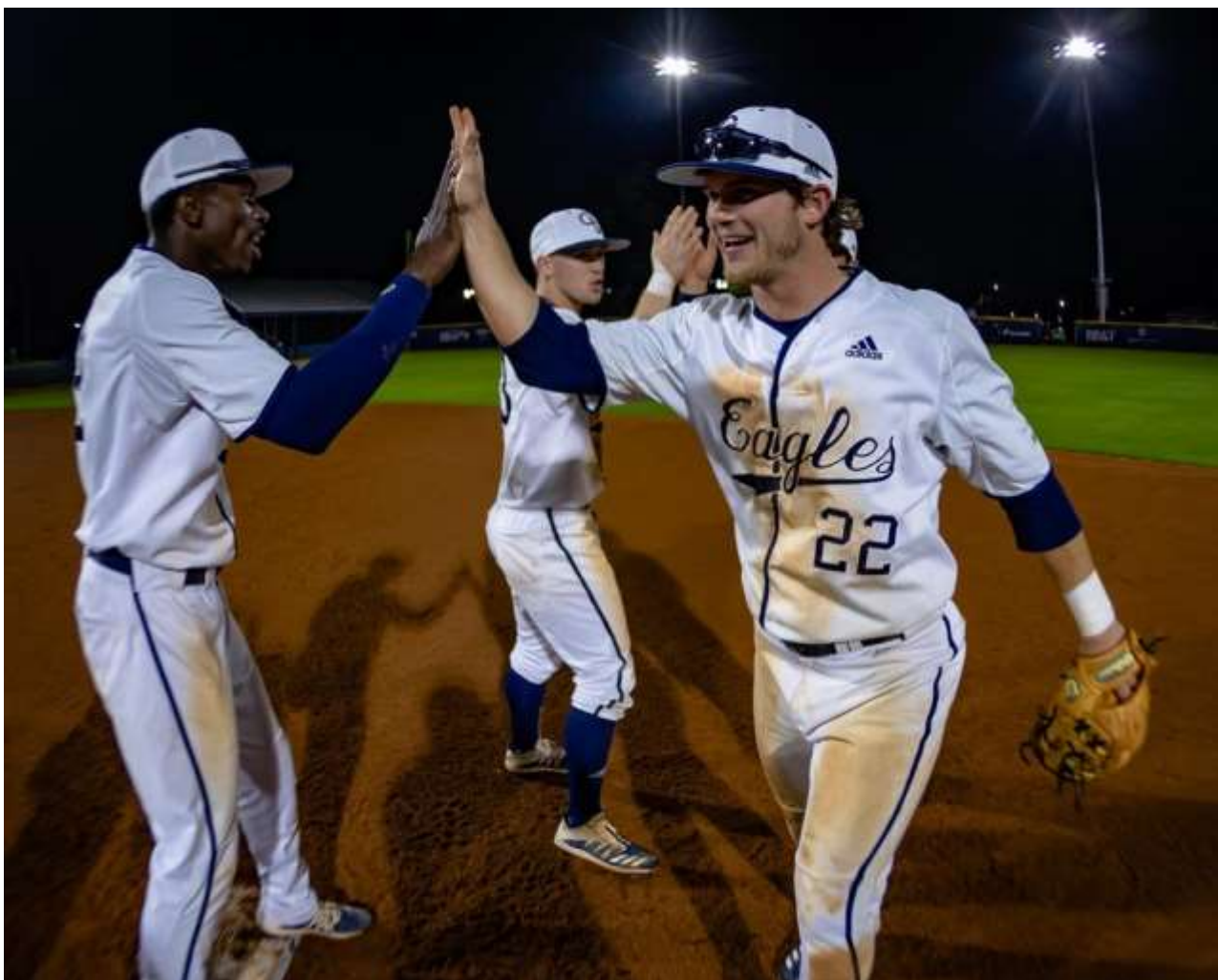
A packed house at J.I. Clements Stadium.

Adversity is something we talk about a lot within our program. We all see now that there is a much bigger challenge facing our world today with the COVID-19 Virus. The approach is the same in that we must face this adversity head on and most importantly together as a team. We must all stay positive and encourage one another and we will get through this together. I am confident that, in the end, this experience will only strengthen our young men. We will grow and I have no doubt we will truly appreciate the opportunity to get back on the field and compete. Often some of the most rewarding things in life require the most patience. This team will be back together in the future and I am excited about being a part of that journey with such a special group of young men.

Head Baseball Coach Rodney Hennon



Post UGA Pep Talk



Team Celebration

The women's golf program had finished a majority of their season with three top-3 finishes as a team. Only three contests remained before the Sun Belt Championships.

I think at a time like this, it's very important to realize that everyone will handle this differently. We are doing what we can to stay connected, support each other, and stay the course on making progress on our long term goals and progressing on continuing to fine-tune our team culture. We talk about #EagleFamily and have used that for years when we post. But this is really making it even more clear that these relationships and connections are so important and mean so much. The team is figuring out how to manage their time with academics, spend time with their families, and continue to make progress with their health, fitness and golf games. We haven't talked a lot about golf - we just want the team to feel loved and supported during this. We feel fortunate that we are able to spend time with loved ones, and are doing everything we can to stay safe and healthy.

Head Women's Golf Coach Emily Kuhfeld



The 2019-20 Women's Golf Team.

The men's tennis team was preparing to take on Youngstown State and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College ahead of a March 15 contest with Troy to open Sun Belt Play. The team had fought to a 9-9 record including a 5-1 mark at home.



Pascal Wagemaker



Suarez and McCullough

The duo senior of Murphy McCullough and Santiago Suarez rose to as high as No. 47 nationally in the ITA rankings in doubles play, finishing the year with six wins. Senior Diego Finkelstein ended with 73 career singles

wins to tie for second all-time in Georgia Southern history. Five more wins would have given Finkelstein the record with 10 matches remaining on the schedule to achieve it.

In the 18-match season, the Eagles had an athlete named Sun Belt Conference Player of the Week for three straight weeks in January through February.

Pascal Wagemaker won it Jan. 29, Alexandros Roumpis on Feb. 5 and McCullough on Feb. 12.



Diego Finkelstein

Like the women's team, men's golf had only three regular-season contests remaining before the conference tournament. The Eagles had previously placed first out of 13 at the JT Potston Invitational Sept. 30-Oct 1. The team was coming off its second team win at the Colleton River Collegiate two weeks prior to trying to defend the Schenkel title.



Jake Maples

I don't know if we're peaking at the right time. I think we're just good and just figuring out how good we are.

Senior Jake Maples



The golf team celebrates the 2019 Schenkel Invitational championship.

It felt like we were in a movie, very surreal. At the time we were told to stop competing, we had only competed in six events which is roughly half of our season. We were fortunate enough to win two of those six events and were starting to play our best golf heading into the meat of our spring schedule.

Head Men's Golf Coach Carter Collins



Arianne de Winter and Paula Boixader

Fresh off a 6-1 win over Toledo in the first ever meeting between the programs, the women's tennis team was preparing for its Sun Belt opener against Louisiana in Statesboro before competition was halted.



Junior Charlotte van Diemen

The Eagles were off to a solid 9-4 record including a 6-2 home record. Four athletes had less than three losses in singles play: Mila Hartig (9-2), Charlotte van Diemen (8-1) and Paula Hijos (10-2). Freshman Nadja Meier also became the first SBC Athlete of the Week in program history on Feb. 12 for her performances against Kennesaw State and USC-Upstate. The team had 10 remaining matches and had one of the best overall records entering conference play.



Senior Paula Boixader

It's sad to finish the season in the manner in which we did, but ultimately it's nothing we can control. Since the first time back in February when Coach started telling the team about the Coronavirus, we knew it was something that could happen but we didn't think too deep into it. We had a goal in mind and we were on track to accomplish our goals. Once the Sun Belt and the NCAA announced that our season was canceled indefinitely, everything felt like it was a nightmare. The team stayed together throughout the tough days and especially the American girls helped the international teammates a lot. We all really rely on each other, our coaches, and staff for support.

Paula Boixader



Freshman Nadja Meier

It was an unexpected and super-fast end to the season. None of us anticipated it but I believe in the team and in our sporting and competitive nature and the mental ambition we all work so hard on. We will fight through this and therefore will come back stronger and hungrier to accomplish what we originally set out to do when we get back.

Nadja Meier



Sophomore Hannah Daniel

Our season was a whirlwind of emotions. It was one that I didn't want to see end because of not only our success, but the atmosphere we created with each other. To have our season end so suddenly in circumstances out of our control is heartbreaking. We are a family and we had to say goodbye a few months earlier than I wanted too. That's one day of my college career I will never forget. We will be back and stronger than ever. This set back has only strengthened us. We can't wait to get back to Statesboro.

I don't think any of us anticipated the way in which our season ended. I watch the news quite a bit and noticed that some things might have been on the horizon in regards to the virus at some point in late January...but never really thinking it would have a direct impact on our season. We tend to oftentimes operate within a bubble during our competitive season. It's how we operate and help our team stay on point. All I could do was make sure the team was as prepared as possible to face any challenges. We made sure we were still extremely focused on our classwork, staying involved in the community, being present and available to teammates, and focusing on our game. But then in a blink of an eye, everything changed. Luckily I have had to deal with a few situations in the past that helped prepare me on how to help my team deal with circumstances outside of their control. I am certain that this virus, and the challenges we are all facing right now, will bring about a newfound level of appreciation and dedication to how our program moves forward. We chose to use this time as a positive reflection point. We have a great deal of unity and love within our team and a great deal of dedication towards our university. We will most certainly come back stronger.

Head Women's Tennis Coach Sean McCaffrey



Softball Team Huddle

Georgia Southern softball was 14-10 overall and 2-1 in Sun Belt Conference play when the season was halted on March 13. The Eagles had opened up league play with a series win over ULM and were coming off of a 6-1 win at the College of Charleston on the Wednesday before their scheduled weekend series at Troy.

In the first two weeks of play, the Eagles enjoyed a school-record 8-2 start and also sat atop NCAA Division I in team ERA. Georgia Southern then split games in the Eagle Round Robin, which included a 12-run fourth-inning outburst in a 13-2, five-inning win over Monmouth on Feb. 22.

The Eagles played a pair of nationally-ranked teams in its next week of action, facing #16 South Carolina in Columbia while also taking on No. 18 Minnesota at the Auburn Tiger Invitational. At the Invitational, Head Coach Kim Dean captured her 100th collegiate head coaching victory in an 8-2 win over Binghamton.



Georgia Southern's offensive production through the first 24 games of the season was one for the record books as the Eagles led the Sun Belt and were on pace for 87 doubles on the year, which would have set a new mark. The .289 team batting average, .386 on-base percentage and .444 slugging percentage were all among the program's best.

Individually, sophomore Faith Shirley's 10 doubles led the Sun Belt Conference and she was one of only 24 players nationally to have reached double-digit doubles through the first month of play. Freshman Aaliyah Garcia's debut season saw her as one of the nation's best in strikeout to walk ratio, collecting 10.17 strikeouts to every walk and ranking 4th in NCAA Division I. And finally, senior Mekhia Freeman was making a concerted bid to being the Sun Belt's Player of the Year with her .403 batting average, five home runs, five stolen bases, .722 slugging percentage and .511 on-base percentage. She ranked among the Sun Belt's leaders in 10 separate offensive categories, leading the league in total bases and runs scored.



I was really proud of how we were playing at that point. We were playing some of our best softball and it was exciting to witness. The team always found ways to celebrate each other and never stopped smiling. Without a doubt, we had found our identity and knew we could take on anyone. I truly believe we were on a path to do some serious damage in the Sun Belt and make all of Eagle Nation proud.

Head Softball Coach Kim Dean



Merbu Nagwandala at the SBC ITF Championship

The track and field team were less than 24 hours from starting the outdoor season as hosts of the GATA Classic before cancelling the annual event. The team saw many athletes improve during the course of the indoor season and was eager to get outdoors.



Several athletes consistently broke indoor school records or moved up the all-time list all season. In the 200m, Scovia Ayikoru moved up to second with a time of 24.36 and Aris Hubbard to fourth at 24.58. Ayikoru also moved up to first in the indoor 400m (55.46). Merabu Nagwandala broke the indoor school records in both the 3000m (10:07.77) and 5000m (17:36.81) on several occasions over the season. Carley Braman also entered the indoor top-5 list in the 5000m with a time of 18:37.69.



I was pretty shocked and the news came very rapidly but I also believe it is very necessary to keep everybody safe. Our staff and our athletes were very disappointed that they weren't able to compete but at the same time everybody understands that the health of the community and the welfare of the nation at-large is bigger than sports.

Head Coach Kelly Carter

The NCAA Division I Council voted on March 30, 2020 to allow schools to provide spring-sport student-athletes an additional season of competition and an extension of their period of eligibility. Financial aid rules were adjusted to allow teams to carry more members on scholarship to account for incoming student-athletes and returning student-athletes who had been in their last year of eligibility who decide to stay.

It's the right thing to do; it's something that we wanted to do. Dr. [Kyle] Marrero and everyone on our leadership staff was very supportive of ensuring that these seniors, these young men and women, have the chance to come back and truly have a fitting senior year.

Athletic Director Jared Benko

Georgia Southern announced that the school will welcome back up to 14 scholarship spring sport seniors who saw their 2019-20 collegiate season cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These seniors will return for an additional season of competition for the Eagles.